THE CLAIMS OF COMMON SENSE

Moore, Wittgenstein, Keynes and the social sciences

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Introduction

Philosophical talk of common sense involves us in a contradiction. The notion points to an inchoate body of beliefs which form the background to our intellectual activities, both high and low. This inherited wisdom is commonly seen as the first line of defense against cranks, and the counter-intuitiveness of new ideas is considered a valued spur to further scrutiny. Common sense is like the loyal opposition in parliamentary democracies – annoying in its constant criticism and in the inertia it adds to the intellectual enterprise, yet important over the long haul in catching unnoticed error. This is, one might say, the common sense understanding of common sense. But philosophy traditionally has attempted to bring our intellectual activities within the purview of a transparent rationality, with the goal usually of improving the idioms if not the content of these activities; and a realm of inchoate and inertial beliefs has been anathema to that project. Perhaps that is why historically philosophers have been so impatient in listening to the claims which common sense has in formulating and justifying our beliefs; next to Plato's or Descartes's ideal knowledge it merited as little respect as folklore. This was certainly the reaction of many when the concept was made a philosophical term of trade. Thomas Reid, for example, and later G. E. Moore, took common sense to consist of a body of indubitable and natural beliefs, and on the basis of this view argued that the skeptical conclusions implied by empiricist epistemology were parasitic upon the forms of belief it doubts. Kant for one was unimpressed with this line of argument, and attacked the intellectual Luddism of the Scottish School: "To appeal to common sense when insight and science fail . . . this is one of the subtile discoveries of modern times, by means of which the most superficial ranter can safely enter the lists with the most

thorough thinker and hold his own."[1] Kant's words have an echo today, for to many the concept smacks of Anglo nostalgia for a less specialized time, an era when the ideal of the amateur seemed a noble ideal to pursue, and the approach of muddling through the only sound one to follow. Appeals to the notion are often seen as reactionary and irresponsible obstacles to the advancement of learning; common sense, according to this interpretation, is not a repository of collective wisdom, it is coextensive with the corpus of past errors.

Much philosophy since the time of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein has abandoned the reconstructive ambitions of traditional philosophy and has therefore been more generous in its appraisal of common sense. However, the conflict between the vagueness of common sense and everyday language and the demands of theory re-emerge. Today few philosophers argue for an indubitable faculty of intuition, and the most influential account of common sense derives from Otto Neurath's metaphor: common sense and ordinary language are like a boat we must rebuild plank by plank while remaining afloat in it. Common sense is not a timeless body of truths, it is merely the current state of theory, our inevitable starting-points for further research, starting-points moreover from which we slowly evolve. This account retains the critical function common sense has always played in philosophy as it implies that skepticism begs the question it raises; and it argues against the more ambitious philosophical projects of a blanket revision of our thought – we have no point outside of common sense from which to remake our conceptual world. Neurath's metaphor is invoked by many different schools of thought who are in other ways in substantial disagreement, but this shared recognition of our starting-points in common sense masks a widespread doubt as to the seaworthiness of the boat in the first place. Indeed, two of the most influential research programs in the philosophical world today, the formal semantics of analytic philosophy, on the one hand, and post-structuralism, on the other, in most ways antithetical to each other, share a fundamental belief in the untrustworthiness of common sense and ordinary language.

[1] *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, edited by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill for the Library of Liberal Arts, 1950), p. 7.

This shared starting-point is found in the thought of their founding fathers, Frege, Russell, and Tarski, on the one hand, and Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, on the other. Tarski, for example, argued that ordinary language is semantically closed and therefore that it leads to antinomies; it is contradictory. As such it is unsuited for philosophical analysis. He sought recourse in the language of a formal semantics. Today, many working within the paradigm established by Frege, Russell, and Tarski similarly find natural language riddled with defects which prevent the construction of a fully extensional language. The problem is that idioms employing tense, quotation, modalities, and talk of intentions lead to referentially opaque contexts. Particularly troublesome in this regard is the inevitable vagueness of ordinary concepts; for quantification to proceed we require entities with clear identity conditions, something which vagueness prevents. Thus, many in the analytic tradition, and Quine is a good example here, accept Neurath's metaphor, but quickly leave common sense behind in their construction of a canonical notation that involves a drastic reparsing of the idioms of natural language.

This distrust of common sense is not confined to analytic philosophy. On the Continent we find a very different sort of criticism being voiced by the post-structuralists, but one that shares with formal semantics a belief in the vagueness and contradiction that ordinary language harbours. Derrida, currently the most influential of that school, has produced a dizzying form of philosophical reading designed to show the impossibility of univocal meaning. Wedding Saussures structural linguistics with Nietzsche's account of the pervasive metaphoricity of language, Derrida has tried to show that symbols are understood only within a network of differences from other symbols; they contain nothing within themselves which might be grasped as their meaning. On the basis of this insight he launched an assault on the entire history of the "philosophy of presence" which, he claims, has been dominated by the mistaken belief that forms, ideas, or meanings can be immediately intuited. His almost narcotic deconstructive analysis involves showing how concepts melt in our hands, dissolve into their other, and undermine our assumed belief in understanding and reason. Where we thought there was serious thought, we now find only the freeplay of metaphorical *jouissance*.

Post-structuralism and analytic philosophy thus, ironically, share a common starting-point – a belief that the vagueness of ordinary language inevitably leads us astray. The dominant philosophical paradigms in the English-speaking world and the Continent differ characteristically in that the former sees our salvation in the ascent to a rarified, Apollonian realm of formal semantics, while the latter recommends a descent into the Dionysian underworld of metaphor. These alternatives are the philosophical gamut that common sense must run today.

They are also the ones which map out the methodological possibilities for the social sciences. Positivism in its various incarnations has for a long time led social scientists to emulate the methods of the natural sciences, Newtonian mechanics in particular. The endeavor has been underwritten at different times by various beliefs: the ontological belief that humans too are matter in motion; the methodological belief that only experimental or deductive science can lead us out of the babel of opinions that clutter the market-place; the belief that a science of intention is impossible; and the current belief in formal semantics that only a canonical notation patterned on the language of physics can close the truth-value gaps existing in ordinary language. For these various reasons many analytic philosophers of the social sciences find the rhetorical practices of many of the liberal arts pre-scientific. Doubt has also been thrown on them by post-structural thought on the subject. Derrida argues that the attempt to elaborate concepts for social analysis is doomed to a fate of paradox and self-delusion. Michel Foucault sees social discourse masking power relations within society; the Marxists find discourse inevitably reflecting class position; and Lacanian Freudians too argue that surface thought conceals deeper concerns. For all these thinkers our common sense understanding of what is taking place on the surface of thought is an illusion.

Thus in both philosophy and the social sciences we are faced with two daunting paradigms: one which finds a properly founded discourse only in the language of physics, and the other which argues that social theory inevitably trades in illusions, ones masking either conceptual contradiction or class interests. Common sense reactions have occurred in philosophy when too many of our natural idioms, forms of argument, or beliefs have been challenged by a new paradigm. When Dr. Johnson kicked his stone

he demonstrated that his native belief in physical objects was stronger than any epistemological argument Berkeley had to offer. And Reid drew the line when Hume cast doubt on our ability to know the objects of perception and on the possibility of disinterested moral acts. Of course others, also in the name of common sense, refused to believe that the world was not flat. There is indeed a difference between these cases and to maintain it we need not rely on a categorical distinction between science and philosophy. It is not the case that common sense has an authority in philosophy that it does not have in science. Common sense merely points to the rational procedure of tenaciously holding on to our current beliefs until enough evidence is mustered to warrant their abandonment. It is a question of degree. From this perspective science has fully warranted a constant throwing off of the old, and epistemological theory has never managed to achieve such a consensus. Moreover, the inertia of common sense has proven valuable in philosophy as we now recognize that empiricist epistemology rested on a naive view as to the possibility of isolating sense data independently of a conceptual framework; in this Johnson and Reid were right – a belief in objects is logically prior to talk of sensation. The same can be said for the reluctance of many in the social sciences and humanities to discard rhetorical forms of discourse: positivist, semantic, and post-structuralist theories have not offered enough in the way of theoretical simplification or empirical result to warrant an abandonment of our intuitions concerning the methods appropriate for these fields. Furthermore, many reject the view that the results of presently unreformulated fields such as history and political theory are undisciplined, emotive arm-waving. There is today something of a common sense reaction to the intellectual alternatives presented to us by formal semantics and post-structuralism. Many philosophers, critics, and social scientists do not accept the terms of the intellectual landscape, that we have to choose between an unattainable rationality and none at all. There is a middle route between these paradigms, and it is displayed in the common sense of those social scientists and critics who have resisted the pull of currently influential philosophies. If common sense is understood as the current state of theory, then for a wide spectrum of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences this involves a methodological ideal of clear prose and persuasive argumentation. And the scholars conducting concrete

research in these fields refuse to concede that their efforts can be dismissed as pre-scientific or pre-post-modern.[2]

It is with a philosophical examination of the claims of this common sense that I am concerned. The alternatives presented today between the restrictive rationalism of much analytic philosophy and the anti-rationalism of post-structuralism is an inaccurate description of our intellectual situation. Ordinary language and rhetorical skills may indeed fall short of the Platonic, Cartesian, or Quinean epistemic ideals, but that does not mean that we are left with a global failure of meaning, as the post-structuralists imply. Thinkers who take common sense seriously do not believe that the failure of our language to meet the demands of extensionalism leaves us in any sort of crisis. Our true situation has been incisively depicted by the literary critic Christopher Ricks. In the course of discussing deconstruction, he considers the idea that "nothing is certain, determinate, stable" and Derrida's resulting "thrilled insistence that *reading* is impossible":

> All that is necessary is to define reading as something that reading has never been thought to be (absolutely entire, absolutely indubitable), and presto, you've added to the human stock of impossibilities – always terrifically cheering, since impossibilities are so much easier to live with than difficulties.[3]

It has often occurred in philosophy that reason has been so narrowly defined that it is found to be useless for most of the questions we ask, and thus an irrationalism or mysticism has emerged as an antidote. Our real situation involves neither; it involves rather, as Ricks puts it, difficulties. Our ordinary language and rhetorical skills may not meet the demands of Quine's canonical notation, but they do not leave us hopelessly tangled in a web of metaphoricity. Historical and literary interpretation inevitably leave doubts, and unanimity and certainty are rarely if ever attained in these fields. But

[2] A good sample statement of this reaction is found in *Plausible Worlds*, by Geoffrey Hawthorn (Cambridge University Press, 1991). He develops an analysis of possibility in the social sciences and concludes that "were it not that 'commonsense' has acquired a bad name in what may loosely be thought of as theoretical argument, I would be tempted to say that against both the old defenders of theoretical reason in the human sciences and their modernist critics, I am merely insisting that we take our commonsensical experience of the human world seriously" p. 185.

[3] "Princes of the Mental States, Review of Giles Gunn, The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture," in *The New York Times Review of Books*, May 14, 1987.

these characteristics of inquiry point out its everyday difficulties, not the impossibility of inquiry under present methods.

This is not to say that Tarski and Derrida have been wrong about the occasional inconsistency of ordinary language. But a recognition of the phenomena they have pointed out should not be seen as implying the need for a flight to formal semantics or a poetry of word association. Tarski's antinomies were often drawn from trivial examples that do little to warrant the abandonment of ordinary language.[4] And it does not make sense to say, as Derrida seems to, that there is a global failure of meaning. We should be wary of such generalizations. There may be utterances, passages, or historical events which admit contradictory interpretations. But the answer to this problem is either to live with a range of possible interpretations, or, in the case of an utterance, to ask the speaker what he means, ask him to clear up the misunderstanding. Perhaps we could continue this interrogation in Socratic style until the speaker is dumbfounded. But to press the questioning beyond a certain point, and that point will depend on the question at hand, is not a display of philosophical ingenuity; it is merely pedantic. The difficulties which we face under present methods do not stem from a defect in our tools. They are not philosophically interesting problems; they are nothing more, but then nothing less, than the ongoing difficulties of discussion and interpretation. Recognizing the pitfalls in discourse highlighted by Tarski and Derrida is an invitation to examine the particular cases where communication fails, and to assess how best to clear up the misunderstanding.

One way to broker the differences existing between the dominant philosophical paradigms and common sense is to re-examine the role of vague concepts in social research. For both Derrida and Quine, who I take to be influential representatives of their fields, vagueness is a defect in language which issues in interpretive indeterminacy. This view lies at the heart of our current problem. However, there is a growing body of work, beginning with the later

[4] See Avrum Stroll, "Is Everyday Language Inconsistent?" *Mind* 63 (1954), pp. 219–25. Stroll admits that we can invent situations in which self-referential sentences lead to contradiction, but in order to draw the lesson from these artificial circumstances that Tarski does "we must be shown that natural languages are inconsistent in the stronger sense that *in fact* such self-referential sentences do or will occur in the common use of these languages" (p. 222). Stroll illustrates through a few examples how unlikely this is.

Wittgenstein, which provides grounds for believing this view to be wrong. Wittgenstein, Max Black, Crispin Wright, and the theorists of fuzzy logic, to name a few, have shown that language is, relative to a Fregean ideal, inescapably vague. That observation at the least makes formal semantics look difficult. Russell pointed out the pervasive vagueness of words, but none the less combined this view with formal semantics by arguing that language only gets what meaning it does attain by approaching the ideal language of logical atomism. However, a more fruitful approach is to work in the opposite direction, by examining the ways in which vagueness may be a virtue in serving the purposes language must serve. It all depends on the function of the tool at hand: sometimes a blurred picture may communicate more meaning than a sharp one. The particular linguistic tool with which I am concerned is the language or languages of the social sciences. And here theoretical simplification of as complex a phenomena as social reality may be advanced, rather than impeded, by concepts which are tolerant of borderline cases. This is an argument that I have extracted from Cambridge philosophy between the Wars, and to do so I have followed several threads leading up to it: G. E. Moore's defense of common sense, Frank Ramsey's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of vagueness, and Keynes's application of these ideas to the social sciences. Keynes's contribution warrants a close examination. He had occasion to discuss the problems of formalization with Wittgenstein, and what resulted in their later philosophies is a compelling argument which points to a mediating route between the philosophical paradigms which today define our intellectual condition. Whereas formal semantics and post-structuralism see vagueness as an impediment to theoretical work, Keynes saw it as an essential property of the language of social science. Formalization of even a part of what goes into our common sense understanding of society would be, as he said, "prolix and complicated to the point of obscurity." Theories constructed with vague concepts paradoxically can maximize precision and economy. For Quine, theoretical simplification is achieved through formalization; for Keynes, it is attained through the concepts of ordinary discourse. Such an argument goes a long way towards vindicating the common sense of many forms of social interpretation currently under suspicion of being methodologically behind the times.

COUNSELS OF PRUDENCE

Methodology has commonly been seen as providing us with a rule book for rational procedure to follow if it is to discover the way the world is, according to an ontology, or if it is to emulate the patently successful methods of the natural sciences. It is difficult today in light of the prevailing skepticism concerning the claims of ontology and epistemology to promote a single, objective, and ahistorical method. Languages are more persuasively defended, on pragmatic grounds, by their proven utility in handling the questions posed. According to this line of reasoning, methodology is no longer seen as providing universal constraints on rational procedure, but rather with "counsels of prudence," as John Dunn calls them, i.e. practical advice on how best to solve a particular problem under study.[5] The value of these rules is proved in practice, not in an a priori manner. The place to look for valuable methodological insights therefore is not in the writings of logicians, but in the practice of successful social scientists. They are the ones with advice to give. The later philosophical writings of Keynes provide a remarkable discussion of language in the social sciences which addresses the issues raised here. Since he was such an important social theorist, Keynes's methodological comments are not empty dictums on how things should be done. He was also an accomplished philosopher who understood the problems of epistemology and method which were to occupy philosophy up to this day. Indeed, Keynes was aware of the tendencies in twentieth century-thought towards either a restrictive scientism or an irrationalist alternative; and he understood the risks they posed for ethical, political, and social thought. Much of his later philosophical writings focused on the inappropriate emulation of the methods of the natural sciences. But he also had occasion to comment on the other risk to reasonable thought marked out by the precursors of post-structuralism. He must have been aware of the creeping doubt these theorists of suspicion were sowing as he lamented that the world had earlier breathed "a purer, sweeter air by far than Freud cum Marx."[6] His ideas on language,

[5] "Practising History and Social Science on 'Realist' Assumptions," in *Political Obligation in its Historical Context. Essays in Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 111.

[6] *Collected Works*, vol. 10, p. 442. I find this passage surprising in its prescience as the synthesis of Marx and Freud really did not pick up steam until the time of Marcuse. All references to the work of Keynes will be to *The Collected Works of John Maynard Keynes*,

together with those of the other Cambridge philosophers, continue to offer a viable alternative to today's paradigms.

In chapter 1 I survey the history of the notion of common sense in philosophy, paying particular attention to how the logic of vagueness emerged as an integral part of its analysis. This is the focus of the book, so the bulk of the philosophers I examine are from the English-speaking world. My goal is to argue for a mediating path between formal semantics and post-structuralism, but the bulk of the book concentrates on the former tradition. I briefly return in the conclusion to discuss the post-structuralists. But my main concern is to trace the evolution of issues concerning common sense, everyday language, and vagueness, and these have been more extensively dealt with within Anglo-Saxon philosophy. The survey of common sense in the first part of the chapter sets the stage for a more focused examination of a tension existing within the thought of Quine, between his recognition of our inevitable starting-points in common sense and his rapid departure from these starting-points as he moves on to defend his canonical notation. I focus on Quine because he is such an influential figure in formal semantics, and because he writes of the conflicting attractions of common sense and an ideal language in such a candid and exciting way. The story of this conflict is continued in chapter 2 where I turn back in time to show how the same forces molded Cambridge philosophy during the thirties. Here Wittgenstein takes center stage, for he fought the same battle Quine was to face later on, although Wittgenstein took the opposite route in that he abandoned the ideal language of logical atomism in favor of preserving the vagueness of ordinary language.

In chapters 3 and 4 I weave Keynes into the fabric of these debates by showing how he belonged to the Cambridge philosophical scene and how he evolved with it. Cambridge philosophy during the twenties and thirties was the scene of some very intense and fruitful discussions between Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein, as well as the economist-philosophers Piero Sraffa and Ramsey. It has not been appreciated that Keynes was also an integral member of this group, and kept his finger on the pulse of the new ideas. I try to reconstruct parts of these discussions and to display Keynes's

edited by D. E. Moggridge and E. Johnson (London: Macmillan for the Royal Economic Society).

participation in them by tracing the development of a few issues in analytic philosophy such as the analysis of vague concepts, and the notion of an ideal language. Attention will also be paid to the influence exerted on the evolution of Cambridge philosophy by Moore. Indeed, I think much of Cambridge philosophy, both early and late, can be seen as shifting attitudes towards Moore's persuasive defense of common sense, as this set up a dynamic contradiction between those philosophies which suggested the need for a reconstruction of our language and those that found it in order as it is. Keynes was caught between these movements in his early work, trying to extend Russell's logic so that it encompassed Moore's common sense. This set up an ambivalent attitude toward analytic philosophy and made it difficult for Keynes to come down squarely in favor of analysis or common sense and ordinary language. However, in his later work he clearly takes the second approach, not only explicitly in his methodological writings, but also implicitly in the language used in writing his masterpiece, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. In the early thirties he confessed to Roy Harrod that he was "returning to an age-long tradition of common sense."[7] In his manuscripts from the time we find a developed argument for the case that vague concepts, the concepts of ordinary discourse, contribute to the simplification of social theory. Keynes's views on the nature of the concepts required for theoretical work, at least within the social sciences, are thus set up as a counter-argument to Quine's case for a canonical notation.

Wittgenstein and Keynes understood concepts to be samples rather than generalizations. In chapter 5 I look at the argument that models in the social sciences as well should be viewed as samples. Keynes again bulks large in this argument. In developing it he drew a distinction between the natural and the social sciences; and in so doing he skirted around several familiar positions, such as the hermeneutic case for adequacy, but deftly avoided the ontological and methodological traps which often limit their appeal. His choice of a language different than those of the natural sciences turns on a recognition of the complexity of social phenomena; concepts that are tolerant of borderline cases facilitate efficiency of theory and communication. His case is pragmatic rather than ontological. In other words, he does not argue that it is necessarily

[7] *Collected Works*, vol. 13, p. 552.

the case that the social sciences use the concepts of ordinary discourse and models resembling somewhat ideal types. Rather, given that the causal factors at work, in macro-economics at any rate, are often historically specific institutions, and that market expectations are chaotic, it is best not to stray too far from concepts and mental constructs with which we have an immediate understanding. If we sever this connection we'll be adrift in confusion. However, for other questions it may well turn out that formalized theory is preferable.[8]

Chapter 6 is somewhat tangential to the issue at hand, for I there sketch a biographical picture of the Cambridge philosophical community. Keynes's interpretation of the ideas being developed in Cambridge bulks large in my argument and I would prefer to present this argument and then move on. But, since it is a somewhat new reading of Keynes, I must assemble the biographical details of his friendships with Moore, Wittgenstein, Ramsey, and Sraffa in order to show that the textual similarities between Keynes's philosophical writings from the thirties and those of Wittgenstein and Ramsey were the natural products of a closer collaboration than has been supposed. The chapter may be a detour, but what emerges as an externality, so to speak, is a missing chapter in the story of Keynes's life as well as in the history of Cambridge philosophy.

In the conclusion I return to contemporary philosophy with the ideas extracted from early Cambridge philosophy and insert them into current discussions of vague concepts and fuzzy logic. I there address the criticisms voiced by positivism and formal semantics that a theory employing the concepts of ordinary discourse is necessarily unsystematic and undisciplined. I also face the concerns of Continental philosophers that such a form of social theory necessarily fossilizes current beliefs and prejudices. I will not deny that this is always a risk; it may even be a prevalent outcome. But the answer to the problem is one that is handled within our native theory, not by a flight to a new level of discourse. Furthermore, the problem must be occasional, rather than permanent, otherwise

[8] Keynes's vision of a social reality characterized by phase changes and emergent properties has been more fully developed recently by the theorists of complexity at the Santa Fe Institute. I do not develop the comparison in this book, but it is worth noting that Keynes's later philosophy of the social sciences addresses many of the questions raised by the theorists of complexity.

the criticism loses its validity. As Donald Davidson has shown, we can make no sense out of the idea that all our beliefs can be wrong. Analogously, it is untenable to argue that there is always a failure of meaning, or that all our views mask self-interest.

One of the questions raised in the book but left unanswered stems from the conclusion that the language appropriate for a social science will depend on the purpose it serves. Crispin Wright, for one, argues that the vagueness we find in ordinary language results from the coarse role these concepts have to play.[9] To extend this argument into the social sciences raises the monumental question of the purposes of the social sciences. I cannot begin to handle such a large issue, as by the nature of the case it would involve analyzing not only each one of the social sciences, but each branch of them as well. But the argument derived from Cambridge philosophy, and from Keynes in particular, none the less helps answer the analytic and post-structuralist critics who have penned blanket methodological critiques of the value of theoretical work conducted by means of rhetorical tools. The conclusion I draw concerning the respectability of these methods may lack the subtlety of a case by case analysis of the use of concepts in the different social sciences, but then so too do the criticisms I attempt to answer. Besides, an anomalous observation is sufficient to falsify an hypothesis, and the success of Keynes's approach is enough to cast doubt on the truth of the theories now dominating the philosophical world.

[9] "On the Coherence of Vague Predicates," *Synthese* 30 (1975), pp. 336–7.